

Adoration of the J Girls

Jasmine, Jessica, Jennifer, Jacqui, Joelle: neighborhood girl-gods of quick fingers and full pockets. The J girls who lap the block and take what they want, garbed in exaltation:

Jasmine of black thongs and push-ups swapped out in dressing rooms. Jessica of sweater-swaddled kittens from behind garage doors. Jennifer of sleeved Slim Jims and pregnancy tests. Jacqui of Oxy-filled purses and money to hide. Joelle of pink cutoffs and lilac bruised thighs.

The J girls who pool-hop apartments to christen each other bikini-clad dichards. The J girls who laugh in spirals and slather themselves with joy:

Jasmine of men's numbers scrawled in white on her palm. Jessica of chlorine-green hair and lip liner swiped from the drugstore. Jennifer of translucent eyelids and cheeks stained self-tanner orange. Jacqui of Kool-Aid dyed bangs and henna-etched arms. Joelle of mascara freckles and a double dimple on one side.

The J girls who breathe chains of smoke Os from the blessed flames of their mouths:

Jasmine of gold-ringed thumbs and Newport 100s. Jessica of hemp bracelets and spliffed Camel Wides. Jennifer of turquoise nails and Virginia Slims. Jacqui of silver anklets and Salem Full Flavor 85s. Joelle of the filched Zippo and trembling Marlboro Ultra Lights.

The J girls who gospel in gossip of plush tongues and soft-slurred consonants and bent-backed vowels. The J girls who know more than they spill:

Jasmine of married cousins in Springfield. Jessica of the hot dad who got caught jacking cars. Jennifer of new foster sisters each year. Jacqui of the Ms. mom who smokes pot and works graveyards as a nurse. Joelle of the recurring stepfather curse and brother who's always high.

The J girls who reign extreme in the kingdom of making-do:

Jasmine, queen of Hearts in juvie. Jessica, queen of flea-bombed carpets and snarling yard mutts. Jennifer, queen of the Westside babysitting ring. Jacqui, queen of beaded doorways and leaky waterbeds and torn Naugahyde. Joelle, queen of lonesome skinny-dipped midnights.

The omnipotent J girls who swim circles through shame and claim their own ways. The J girls who say *sorry not sorry, not bad, not fair, not far, not enough, not all, not finished, not hardly, not dead, not yet, not long, not never*—but never *not mine*.